

# HEPATITIS C

## General Information



### Can Hepatitis C be prevented?

Yes. To reduce the risk of becoming infected with the Hepatitis C virus:

- Do not share needles or other equipment to inject cosmetic substances, drugs, or steroids
- Do not use personal items that may have come into contact with an infected person's blood, such as razors, nail clippers, toothbrushes, or glucose monitors
- Do not get tattoos or body piercings from an unlicensed facility or in an informal setting

### Is there a vaccine for Hepatitis C?

Although there is currently no vaccine to prevent Hepatitis C, research is being conducted to develop one.

### What is hepatitis?

"Hepatitis" means inflammation of the liver. The liver is a vital organ that processes nutrients, filters the blood, and fights infections. When the liver is inflamed or damaged, its function can be affected.

Hepatitis is most often caused by a virus. In the United States, the most common types of viral hepatitis are Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C. Heavy alcohol use, toxins, some medications, and certain medical conditions can also cause hepatitis.

### What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease that results from infection with the Hepatitis C virus. When first infected, a person can develop an "acute" infection, which can range in severity from a very mild illness with few or no symptoms to a serious condition requiring hospitalization.

**Acute** Hepatitis C is a short-term illness that occurs within the first 6 months after someone is exposed to the Hepatitis C virus. For reasons that are not known, 15%–25% of people "clear" the virus without treatment. Approximately 75%–85% of people who become infected with the Hepatitis C virus develop "chronic," or lifelong, infection.

**Chronic** Hepatitis C is a long-term illness that occurs when the Hepatitis C virus remains in a person's body. Over time, it can lead to serious liver problems, including liver damage, cirrhosis, liver failure, or liver cancer (see chart).

### How is Hepatitis C spread?

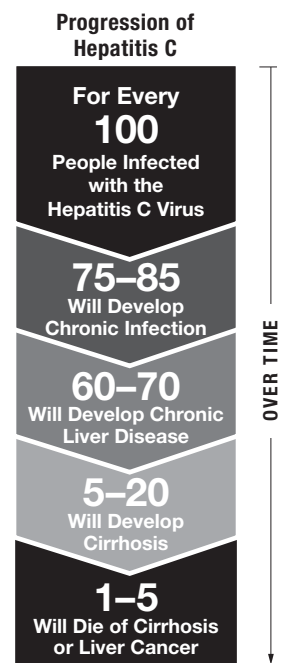
Hepatitis C is usually spread when blood from a person infected with the Hepatitis C virus enters the body of someone who is not infected. Today, most people become infected with Hepatitis C by sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs. Before widespread screening of the blood supply began in 1992, Hepatitis C was also commonly spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants. Although uncommon, outbreaks of Hepatitis C have occurred from blood contamination in medical settings.

### Can Hepatitis C be spread through sex?

Yes, although scientists do not know how frequently this occurs. Having a sexually transmitted disease or HIV, sex with multiple partners, or rough sex appears to increase a person's risk for Hepatitis C. There also appears to be an increased risk for sexual transmission of Hepatitis C among gay men who are HIV-positive.

### Can a person get Hepatitis C from a tattoo or piercing?

There is little evidence that Hepatitis C is spread by getting tattoos in licensed, commercial facilities. Whenever tattoos or body piercings are given in informal settings or with non-sterile instruments, transmission of Hepatitis C and other infectious diseases is possible.





## How is Hepatitis C treated?

Since acute Hepatitis C rarely causes symptoms, it often goes undiagnosed and therefore untreated. When it is diagnosed, doctors recommend rest, adequate nutrition, fluids, and antiviral medications. People with chronic Hepatitis C should be monitored regularly for signs of liver disease. Even though a person may not have symptoms or feel sick, damage to the liver can still occur. Antiviral medication can be used to treat some people with chronic Hepatitis C, although not everyone needs or can benefit from treatment. For many, treatment can be successful and results in the virus no longer being detected.

## What can people with Hepatitis C do to take care of their liver?

People with chronic Hepatitis C should see a doctor regularly. They also should ask their health professional before taking any prescriptions or over-the-counter medications—including herbal supplements or vitamins—as they can potentially damage the liver. People with chronic Hepatitis C should also avoid alcohol since it can accelerate liver damage.

## How common is Hepatitis C?

An estimated 3.2 million people in the United States have chronic Hepatitis C. Most are unaware of their infection. Each year, about 17,000 Americans become infected with Hepatitis C.

## How serious is Hepatitis C?

Chronic Hepatitis C is a serious disease that can result in long-term health problems, including liver damage, liver failure, and liver cancer. Approximately 12,000 people die every year from Hepatitis C-related liver disease.

## What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C?

Many people with Hepatitis C do not have symptoms and do not know they are infected. Even though a person has no symptoms, the virus can still be detected in the blood.

If symptoms occur with acute infection, they can appear anytime from 2 weeks to 6 months after exposure. Symptoms of chronic Hepatitis C can take up to 30 years to develop. Damage to the liver can silently occur during this time. When symptoms do appear, they often are a sign of advanced liver disease. Symptoms for both acute and chronic Hepatitis C can include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, grey-colored stools, joint pain, and jaundice.

## How is Hepatitis C diagnosed?

Doctors can diagnose Hepatitis C using specific blood tests that are not part of blood work typically done during regular physical exams. Typically, a person first gets a screening test that looks for “antibodies” to the Hepatitis C virus. Antibodies are chemicals released into the bloodstream when a person becomes infected. The antibodies remain in the bloodstream, even if the person clears the virus. If the screening test is positive for Hepatitis C antibodies, different blood tests are needed to determine whether the infection has been cleared or has become a chronic infection.

## Who should get tested for Hepatitis C?

Testing for Hepatitis C is recommended for certain groups, including people who:

- Currently inject drugs
- Injected drugs in the past, even if it was just once or occurred many years ago
- Have HIV infection
- Have abnormal liver tests or liver disease
- Received donated blood or organs before 1992
- Have been exposed to blood on the job through a needlestick or injury with a sharp object
- Are on hemodialysis

## For more information

Talk to your health professional, call your health department, or visit [www.cdc.gov/hepatitis](http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis).



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

*Division of Viral Hepatitis*

